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SCHOLASTIC PRESS /
NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-1-338-05388-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 18 19 20 21 22

Printed in the U.S.A. 23
First edition, April 2018

Book design by Nina Goffi

CHAPTER ONE

Brodie didn't remember the exact moment that he died. But he did remember the exact moment that he woke up afterward.

When he woke up, he was already running.

The grass was wet under his paws. It felt cool and clean and new. Like morning.

The muscles in his legs flexed and stretched and bounded. They were strong. They were *fast*.

His tongue flopped as he gulped mouthfuls of sweet air.

He barked, a free and wild bark, up at the blue skies above him. It was a *yes* bark, a *hooray* bark.

He wasn't being chased. He wasn't afraid. Or tired. Or hungry. Or hurting.

He was . . . *happy*.

The word floated into his head and stayed there.

Happy.

It was his very first word. Just like that, he had it, in his head, and he *knew* it. He knew what it meant. He knew what it felt like. The word sizzled in his head like a piece of hot-from-the-pan salty bacon in his mouth.

Happy.

His tail was all wag.

Tail. That word was next. Then, *wag*. And right after it: *running*.

He barked again, a *happy* bark, loud and joyful.

And then another bark answered him.

He turned his head and saw a dog, running beside him. She was long and lean, with short brown fur the color of good wet mud. *Dog*. That was an important word, he knew. It was *him*. He was *dog*. And then: *mud*. Yes. That was a truly wonderful word. *Mud!* That word made him so happy that he barked again, a high playful *yip*. He felt the word *mud* in his head, sloppy and slurpy and squishy, and he barked out how much he liked that word.

The other dog barked back.

She was matching him stride for stride, her ears bouncing, her eyes shining. Everything he saw put new words into his head: *Eyes*. *Ears*. *Shining*.

She stretched out her long legs and got her nose just ahead of Brodie's.

Play! The word shouted itself into his understanding.

He pushed his muscles harder and added length to his strides, as he added two words to his growing collection: *race* and *faster!*

Brodie turned his eyes forward and the world filled in around him. When he'd woken, it had been only the grass under his paws and the sky above his head and then *her*. But now, like a fog was blowing away, he saw a great green field stretching down before him to a river, blue and sparkling. Here and there were clumps of trees and bushes. And all around him and in front of him and beside him were *dogs*. Dogs running. Dogs jumping. Dogs chasing and barking.

Dogs rolling in that sweet soft grass. Dogs splashing in the river.

They were all sizes. All colors.

And all the tails were wagging. And not a single lip was pulled up in a snarl.

Happy.

All those dogs, each one of those wonderful running splashing playing barking dogs, were *happy*.

Brodie and the brown dog raced down a gentle slope and toward the river, taking turns being first. His charging legs ate at the ground with great galloping bites. His muscles were a celebration as they churned. *Running!*

They thundered down the hill and splashed through the muddy shallows of the river, romping and kicking up the water between them.

And as they ran, more and more words rose up and took root in Brodie's mind. *Tree, bush, teeth, leaf, after, before, rocks, sunshine, claw, water, follow, splash, sand. Friend.*

They ran fast, and faster, and fastest, and his legs never got tired. His lungs sucked at the air but never came up short of breath.

Finally satisfied, they flopped down together on the edge of the river, half in the cool flowing water and half on the grass of the shore.

Brodie looked down at the smooth blue water and saw a dog looking back up at him. *Reflection*, his mind whispered. *You*. He saw short white fur, with a dark black spot around

one eye. He saw one ear that perked up, another that flopped forward. A wet, black nose. *Me*, he thought.

The brown dog lapped at the water, drinking in big, gulping swallows, then looked up at him with smiling eyes and a dripping snout.

“You’re new, aren’t you?” she asked.

Brodie cocked his head. His tail stopped wagging. Her question startled him.

It wasn’t the words. Yes, they were new, but as soon as she asked them they were there, in his head, and he knew them.

No. It was her voice. It didn’t come from her mouth. She didn’t bark her words, or growl them.

The words—and her voice—were just there, in his head.

“Oh, you *are* new!” she said in her soundless voice that he could nevertheless hear. “You’re still getting your words and everything!”

For the first time since waking, Brodie felt something less than happy.

He felt confused. Scared, even.

His tail slowed, then drooped.

“Oh, don’t worry,” she said, straightening up. “Really. It’s all good.” She stepped forward and nudged her chin under his nose, licked at the corners of Brodie’s mouth. She was telling the truth.

She was a good dog. Believe me, she was.

“Here,” she said. “Start with this: What’s your name?”

Name, Brodie thought. He rolled the word around in his head like a toy with a squeak hidden inside. *My name is me*, he thought. *It is what I'm . . . called.*

He shook his head. He searched through the clouds in his heart, looking, trying to remember.

But Brodie? He couldn't remember anything. Not one thing. A whimper grew in his throat.

Then, out of nowhere, it came to him. Brodie's name floated right into his mind and settled there like a drifting feather. Almost like an angel put it there.

It was a name he had never said, because he had never talked. But it was a name that he'd heard a hundred, a thousand, a million times. All at once he could hear it. He could hear it being called, and laughed, and whispered. He could hear it being shouted.

"Brodie," he said, and his answer did not come up from his throat or out through his mouth but, somehow, just from his thoughts to hers. Just like her words had come to him.

"Brodie," she said, and wagged her tail harder. "Hi, Brodie. My name is Sasha."

"Sasha," Brodie said to her, and then he barked with his mouth and it was another happy bark.

He slurped at the water with a thirsty tongue, scattering his reflection into ripples. The water was sweet, and pure, and cold enough to give his mouth happy shivers. And another word appeared to him: *perfect*.

“It’s great, isn’t it?” Sasha said.

“What, the water?”

She showed her teeth, happy, and raised her nose to sniff at the sunshine and the air.

“All of it.”

He looked around. At the sun-sparkled water. The green grass. At all those dogs, all those wagging tails.

“Yes,” he answered. But he kept looking. As far as he could see. He looked left and he looked right. He turned his head to look at all that bright world around him.

Brodie was looking for something. Something that was . . . missing. He didn’t know what it was. But he knew without a doubt that it wasn’t there.

Because Brodie? He had one of those hearts that doesn’t forget for long.

“But,” he started to say, but he had no words to finish. He cocked his head, confused.

“Yes,” Sasha said, and her voice was soft, serious, understanding. “I know. You’re trying to remember. And you will,” she added, reaching to tap at Brodie’s paw with her own. “Don’t worry. You’ll remember.”

“Remember what?” he asked her.

“Before, Brodie. You’ll remember Before here. You’ll remember . . . your life.”

Life. The word rang in his head and hung there. There were layers to that word, threads that ran through it, light that sparkled within it. And shadows around all its edges. It was a heavy, warm, humming word.